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REVIEW & OUTLOOK

Undeniable Terror

A Turk named Agca shot the pope. Why? Because the KGB, under Yuri Andropov, paid him to do it.

That may well be the verdict of an Italian court next year. Judge Ilario Martella, who's spent two years investigating the role of Bulgarian agents in the attempt on the pope's life, completed his report last week. The trial on "active complicity" charges could begin this spring against Sergei Antonov, a Bulgarian airline official-cum-spy based in Rome. This would be the first official airing of evidence pointing in the direction of Yuri-know-who. Incredible? Yes. But, after considering the evidence, not unbelievable.

Agca has admitted he didn't act alone, telling reporters this summer, "in the attack against the pope even the KGB took part." We now have two new books filling in the cracks in the Bulgarian connection theory. Former national security staffer Paul Henze's "The Plot to Kill the Pope" (Scribner's) is already reaching the bookstores. And Claire Sterling, the Rome-based American journalist who wrote the Reader's Digest article that presented the first evidence of the Bulgarian connection, is about to publish "The Time of the Assassins" (Holt, Rinehart & Winston), excerpted nearby.

It seems reasonably certain that Agca was brought to the Communists through the Bulgarian-controlled arms and drug smuggling in and out of Turkey, and by the promise of big bucks. And more particularly through Abuzer Ugurlu, a Turkish Mafia don who operates from Sofia, Bulgaria. Ugurlu has also been a Bulgarian spy since 1974, according to U.S. intelligence. He runs drugs through Bulgaria from Turkey to Western Europe for profit. And he packs his trucks with weapons for the return trip to Turkey, helping the Soviets try to topple Turkish democracy.

Drawing on the Henze and Sterling accounts, this is Agca's most likely vita:

Agca is recruited by a left-wing group. He spends the summer of 1977 in a PLO training camp in Lebanon. By December 1977 someone or some organization opens a bank account in his name. In January 1979 he confesses to killing Abdi Ipekci, a leftist Turkish journalist, and gains right-wing credentials. In November 1979 he escapes from jail, thanks to Abuzer Ugurlu, who also arranges a false passport. He spends an all-expenses paid summer at a hotel in Sofia. There Agca meets one of Ugurlu's associates, who offers him \$1.3 million to kill the pope. While in Rome, Agca is "run" by Bulgarian Rome secret service chief Antonov, who drives Agca to St. Peter's Square the day of the shooting.

So Agca was a highly trained hit man at the disposal of the Bulgarians. The motive of Bulgaria's spymaster, the KGB? Poland. The Kremlin feared that the Carter White House had arranged the election of Pope John Paul II, and that his plan was to help Solidarity lead an East bloc revolt against the Soviets.

This tale of spies and conspiracies is gripping, but there is an even more sobering part of the story. The second half of the Sterling book is entitled "Publishing the Plot, Disturbing the Peace." She describes how U.S. and other Western officials have pooh-poohed the Bulgarian link, and ignored strong evidence. It is striking how much distance Western governments have apparently put between themselves and any real investigations.

What we know about Agca we owe to the courage of Italian judges, who live in bunkered homes to avoid assassinations, and who have all but neutralized the Red Brigades. Like Turkey, Italy has been a prime target of Soviet terror exports. Prime Minister Bettino Craxi made drug-running the top agenda item in his recent talks with President Reagan. Even now there is strong pressure from Bul-

garia to release Antonov from prison for "health reasons." But so far the Italians have taken the drugs-arms-Soviet terror link seriously, and so should others.

What is needed in most Western nations is some political will to overcome what might be called the "cult of denial." The West seems generally to have tuned out the plot on the pope, "yellow rain" and other Soviet arms-control violations in much the same way it dismissed early reports of Stalin's purges and Hitler's concentration camps. Admittedly the answers to such cruel truths are not easy to frame, but surely the first step is to stop denying the dangers we face.